TAFE cuts will undermine state's own tertiary policies

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Victorian Training Minister Peter Hall has made it known he is no supporter of state cuts to TAFE. Source: Supplied

NEW policy settings for vocational education in Victoria, which were a precurser to massive budget cuts to TAFE in last week's state budget, are designed to maintain a demand-driven system at lower cost to government. But there will also be consequences for higher education participation.

Many universities have been working closely with TAFE institutes to encourage more students to progress from vocational to higher education. Across the state, about 15 per cent of students are selected for bachelor degrees on the basis of their vocational studies, mostly at public TAFE institutes.

An average of 7 per cent of commencing Monash University students articulate from a TAFE qualification. These articulating students perform well. Across three years of study, students who attained an ATAR in the range of 65-69 and then undertook a TAFE certificate IV or diploma achieved higher average marks than students in the 85-89 ATAR range who were admitted to Monash directly from school.

TAFE pathways prepare students well for higher education, even those who did not excel at school.

Higher level vocational study will become more expensive, as price controls are removed, along with youth concessions. Some areas will be attractive to private providers and some higher demand providers may be able to sustain programs on the basis of student contributions. Other areas will be rationalised.

The skills reforms have already clearly illustrated the effect of pricing changes in both directions on demand and participation - subsidised courses grew and reskilling reduced in line with eligibility for subsidised places.
Although FEE-HELP is already available at diploma level, only one in six students take advantage of it. We can expect many students will now choose to move directly into higher education diplomas or degrees, effectively shifting delivery from the state to federal government. These students will pay more for the privilege and miss out on the benefits of smaller group teaching and practical focus provided in vocational education.

The reduced pipeline of TAFE diploma graduates is only one side-effect.

Key tertiary education policies from the 2008 Bradley review onwards have focused on improving the integration of higher, vocational and school education.

Ironically, the cuts that Higher Education and Skills Minister Peter Hall is implementing will hit hardest in low-income regions like his own Gippsland electorate. The Victorian government's own plan for tertiary education in Gippsland hinges on coordinating and integrating provision in line with local needs, using existing infrastructure and new technology.

The 5 per cent regional loading announced in the budget will not stretch to provide enough resources for these developments.

Better educated communities are healthier, more stable and more productive. TAFE institutes have deep expertise and capability in preparing people from diverse backgrounds for work and social participation.

In metropolitan communities like Dandenong, as well as in the regions, TAFE plays a crucial role in assisting refugees and new migrants to gain employment and find their way in Australia. In low income, culturally diverse communities, every person assisted by TAFE to gain employment and knowledge in turn strengthens the resilience of that community.

The success of young people at school and their chances of studying at university are improved by having a family and community that is financially stable and engaged with education. Fragmented provision by private providers, stripped of the extra services that TAFE has been able to offer, will struggle to achieve these outcomes.

The cuts to TAFE will directly impact on participation in higher education as fewer students are supported to study higher level qualifications, and in the long run as TAFE's role as a community resource is weakened.

TAFE institutes have demonstrated their resourcefulness in responding to numerous reforms, but it is hard to see how such drastic changes can be absorbed without the loss of programs, staff and expertise.

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